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An Intervention into the Debates on ‘Work-in-Education’ and Skill Development in India

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V. Santhakumar



The paper analyses the debates surrounding 'work' as part, or as an outcome, of school education in India and argues that these have not reckoned adequately the socioeconomic reality of the corresponding times. The outcome of education depends on ideas and resources shaping its provisioning, and the use by the people. Colonial rulers provided a liberal schooling which did not aim at 'schooling for all' or imparting skills as part of schooling. Such an education was attractive to those children who were not working in agriculture or artisanal occupations for their livelihood or who belonged to a 'rentier' class. The lower opportunity cost of time for these children and the probability of getting a job in the colonial administration enabled this small section of society to opt for such a liberal schooling. It is in this context that Gandhi wanted to use work (or agricultural and artisanal skills) as a pedagogical tool for education. However, the majority of children who were bound to do such work then did not view formal schooling, which aimed at imparting these 'skills,' attractive.

Those who lament about the dearth of skills among the workforce in India neglect the 'schooling failure' leading to a situation where about 50 percent of students do not complete secondary schooling. This shows the need for a greater focus on 'schooling for all' along with the attempts to skilling the work force in India. The current situation provides opportunities to bring in work as part of education by including those skills which students do not acquire on their own or with the help of parents. Such a schooling may offer sections of children a choice to be a skilled worker (whose default choice is to the non-completion of schooling and be an unskilled worker including a full-time home maker).

Key Words: Basic Schooling, Mahatma Gandhi, Work-in Education, India, Skill Development, Demand for Education, Vocational Schooling, Schooling for All

An Intervention into the Debates on 'Work-in-Education' and Skill Development in India

V. Santhakumar¹

The 'immodest' claim of this paper is that new insights can be generated if we use a somewhat different approach to the debates on 'work-in-education' or skill-development in India. It is true that the 'work-in-education' approach (advocated by Mahatma Gandhi) is different from that of the skill-development programmes that are currently in vogue in India. The focus of the former was to use (artisanal or agricultural) work or livelihood as a way of imparting education in schools whereas the latter attempts to create enough skilled workers for industrial employment. However, the central argument of the paper is that there is a certain common feature in all the debates surrounding 'work' as part, or as an outcome, of school education in India. These debates include the critique of colonial education in the country, Gandhi's proposal for a 'basic education' (work-in-education), the liberals' opposition to Gandhi's approach, the radical critique of the failure of the Indian state with regard to the implementation of work-centred education, and also the policy discourses surrounding the efforts currently being made by the governments and industry to promote skill-development. The paper attempts to show that though all these positions have raised important concerns, they fail to take into account certain aspects of socioeconomic reality of the corresponding times, partly due to the normative positions held by the proponents². This has worked against taking a realistic and pragmatic approach to place 'work' in the setting of school education. It is argued here that work and education linkage (as a way to evince interest in education and to enhance the skill-orientation of those who complete schooling) is important for countries like India, especially in the current scenario.

1 The author thankfully acknowledges the comments received from Sujit Sinha, Ashok Sircar, and an anonymous external reviewer. The usual disclaimers apply.

2 Since the focus is on this common feature, the treatment of each debate is not that comprehensive in this paper.

Outline of the approach followed in the paper

The paper follows an analytical-empirical approach informed by economic theory. The outcome of any process of education depends on ideas and resources shaping its provisioning (or supply), and the use (or demand) by the people (students and their parents). This is more so in those cases where students are not compelled coercively or mandatorily to attend schools as in the case of India³. In such cases, why would parents voluntarily send their children to schools? This happens when parents find that sending children to school is more beneficial than other ways of engaging them (at home or farm). This may require information or demonstration that schooling leads to a 'betterment' (in whatever way we define it) of the lives of their children, and probably themselves. If such a perception is weak, people may not use schools, even if schooling is provided (Santhakumar et al, 2016). The thinking that schooling should be of a particular kind, without being concerned about whether that would encourage parents to send their children to schools in the given 'circumstance', need not make a significant impact in the real world.

The 'circumstance' mentioned here depends on a number of factors. Whether there will be a betterment of lives through education depends on social and economic conditions. This aspect is well recognised. However, there is another dimension which is not appreciated adequately. The circumstances are shaped in turn by the use of schooling⁴. If for some reason the majority of children do not use schools, it may have a bearing on the nature of economic growth of a country, especially if its economy is open. For example, the products for which educated labour is necessary will be imported to that economy from elsewhere and it may have a negative impact on the growth of certain economic activities. This in turn may reduce the attractiveness of getting an education for certain sections of the society. Hence the relationship between the demand for education and the extent and nature of economic activities need not be a unidirectional one but could be part of an equilibrium. The efforts to provide education of a particular kind need to take into account this correspondence with the economic domain.

It does not mean that the use of education is determined exclusively by economic aspects. It is well known that social (or sociological) factors like parental education or social identity (say caste in India) impact the access to, and achievements in, schooling⁵. Such factors may also work against the spread of information and the realisation of a 'demonstration effect'. Even when students belonging to the upper castes benefit from education, it may not work as an adequate demonstration for those belonging to the lower castes where social fragmentation is severe (Santhakumar et al, 2016). When such issues discourage children belonging to certain sections of society from using education well,

3 India does not have a mandatory schooling policy. Though the Right to Education Act can be interpreted as a mandatory policy, it does not have effective mechanisms for enforcement (Santhakumar et al, 2016).

4 The use of schooling in a specific context is a partial equilibrium shaped by the supply of and demand for schools, but this partial equilibrium is one factor shaping the general equilibrium of the economy as a whole.

5 Global evidence in this regard is reviewed by researchers, including recently, Lee and Shute (2010). An assessment in the context of India is given in Santhakumar et al (2016).

it may have an impact on the distribution of skilled workers in society. This may in turn affect not only the economic growth of the country but also its human development. The nature of economic and human development is not only determined by, but also influences, the incentives or interest to acquire education.

This complex web of social and economic relations determines the success and failures of an approach to schooling. It is this idea that informs the analysis of different proposals for work-in-education or skill-development in this paper. The limited scope of the paper needs to be highlighted. It does not analyse the contents (curriculum and pedagogy) of different approaches to schooling here. Instead it takes up the broad contours or expectations of these different approaches. Each of these approaches is based on a particular worldview and one may question the usefulness of analysing it on the basis of another view. Even when an approach is based on a particular worldview, there are certain expectations on the part of the proponents, and such expectations are based on an understanding of social reality. For example, though Gandhi's concept of basic education was shaped by his worldview, he was proposing it to be the basis of mainstream schooling in India. Hence it becomes important to understand whether the reasons for the failure of Gandhi's approach to enthuse the majority of people, lay in the divergence between Gandhi's pedagogic vision and worldview vis-à-vis people's expectations from mainstream schooling.

Colonial education in India: A 'success', given its limited purpose

There are innumerable writings criticising the education pursued by colonial rulers in India, and there is no point in repeating them here. However, the central argument posited is that colonial education had a limited purpose and it was successful in that regard. It is known that the purpose of the colonial rulers in India was to create manpower who could comprise the middle or lower levels of the machinery of their administration⁶. Providing 'schooling to all' was not their intention⁷. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, there was a move to avoid apprenticeships as a way of schooling children from poorer families, and to integrate everybody into a common schooling that taught reading, writing and arithmetic in Britain⁸. This idea of 'liberal schooling' – which has continued to influence the schooling in the UK even during the twentieth century – could have influenced the nature of education that the colonial rulers pursued in India. It could be one factor that dampened their interest in a work-oriented education.

6 The well-known quote from Macaulay (1835) summarises this attitude: 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population'.

7 Here too one can quote Macaulay: 'In one point I fully agree with the gentlemen to whose general views I am opposed. I feel with them that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people' (Ibid.)

8 See Smith (2001). 'Ragged schools and the development of youth work and informal education'.

When the colonial rulers attempted to provide schooling in India with their 'limited' purpose, they did not have to work hard to enthruse a small section of Indian society to acquire such education. In fact, the colonial rulers would have found it very difficult if the majority of the Indian population had wanted schooling. The social structure characterised by the caste system facilitated the creation of such limited (but 'adequate' for the purpose of colonial rulers) demand for education. The priestly and the land-owning but non-cultivating groups were depending on rents (including that from the tenants), and they (and their children, mainly boys) were not forced to do unskilled labour (including in their own farms) for subsistence. In that sense, their opportunity cost of time was lower than that of lower caste children, whose time was used by their families for their subsistence. The former could divert the unused or underused time to acquire colonial education⁹. Given the lower cost of input, acquiring education became attractive even though its benefits were uncertain¹⁰ (due to the lower probability of getting a job then).

It was the combination of the supply (of colonial education with its intended purpose), and the demand (from a small section of the society facilitated by their lower opportunity cost of time) that shaped the outcome or the equilibrium of education¹¹.

Gandhi's critique: Where was he right and wrong?

It is well known that Gandhi was a major critic of the education provided by the colonial rulers. He criticised it on a number of occasions and for a variety of reasons: these are reflected in several of his writings, and a full review of these is not intended or relevant here¹². For Gandhi, the education designed by Macaulay enslaved Indians¹³, or it was an education which had become a factory for government employees or clerks in commercial offices¹⁴. This had encouraged him to argue for new experiments in education, which led to the concept of 'basic education' which aimed at integrating work and education. According to one description of Gandhi's view,

'...participation in productive work under conditions approximating to real-life situations is pedagogically linked to learning and simultaneously becomes the medium of knowledge acquisition, developing values and skill formation. In addition, engagement with work will help promote multi-dimensional attributes in the cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains in a holistic manner i.e. by integrating 'head, hand and heart'¹⁵.

9 Some of the upper caste sections were using their time for other forms of education, and it was easy for them to shift towards colonial education as it was found to be more beneficial.

10 One may see that a section of Indian society continued to educate its children even when there was a high level of unemployment among the educated people during the post-independence period.

11 One way to look at the outcome is to see the literacy rate. It was 7.2% in 1931 and 12.2% in 1947; see, Naik and Nurullah (1974). The share of those who pursued schooling seriously then could be much lower than these figures.

12 A compilation of his writings in this regard are available: For example, Kumarappa (1953).

13 This is from *Hind Swaraj* (1908), Chapter XVII, as quoted in Kumarappa (1953).

14 *Speeches and Writings of Gandhi*, p. 312-313, as reproduced in Kumarappa (1953).

15 Report of the National Focus Group on Work and Education (2005: 3). A detailed treatment of Gandhi's approach to schooling can be seen in Fagg (2002) and Richards (2001).

This aspect, according to Gandhi, was missing in the education designed by the colonial rulers in India.

However, his approach to education failed to make a significant mark in post-independent India. The Report of the National Focus Group (NFG) on Work and Education (prepared in 2005) attributes this failure to a hesitant approach followed by policy makers starting from the Education Commission of 1964-66. Apart from the support extended by the post-independence governments to the kind of education designed by colonial rulers, the tendency to practice the 'Gandhian' approach as a separate stream was also recognised as a reason for its gradual collapse. However, the policy makers in independent India could have been influenced by the lack of enthusiasm of people at large in converting the whole education system that the country had inherited from the colonial rulers into the one advocated by Gandhi. There was also opposition to the expansion of 'basic education' in the urban areas of Tamil Nadu after its limited success in rural areas in the late forties. The lower-caste political mobilisations, like those in Tamil Nadu, saw the integration of work and education as an attempt to perpetuate caste-based occupation. Hence it may be far more interesting to look at the fundamental reasons for the failure of Gandhi's approach which have reflected in the lower demand for such schooling from significant sections of Indian society.

Gandhi was precise in criticising the colonial education for its uselessness and irrelevance for the majority of Indian society. Hence he proposed a schooling which was closer to their 'life'. For him, the concept of work-in-education was to make this symbiotic relationship between life and schooling richer and meaningful.

Let us analyse Gandhi's diagnosis and prescription based on the approach followed in this paper. The fact that the demand for colonial education was limited to a small section of the society (less than 10% of children of the relevant age group) showed the 'disinterest' in schooling among the majority of children (and their parents) in the country. As noted earlier, they had encountered higher opportunity cost of time (due to the need to 'work' in one or other forms). Given the limited employment opportunities in colonial administration and in the limitedly-growing (and small sized) economy, the expected benefits of education were also not high. Given these higher opportunity costs and relatively lower expected benefits, it was not surprising to see a muted enthusiasm for schooling from the majority. This was especially so since post-independent governments in India did not follow a policy of mandatory schooling or carry out concerted attempts to bring in most children to schools, unlike socialist states of USSR, China and Vietnam or non-socialist states in South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia¹⁶. In a situation where the majority survives through subsistence agriculture, a policy of providing schooling to those who demand it would result in a majority not using it (Santhakumar et al, 2016).

¹⁶ The role of campaigns in China is noted in (Rosen 1992) and in a number of these countries in Santhakumar et al (2016). For a history of literacy development in different countries, see Burnett et al (2005).

Hence Gandhi was correct in identifying the supply constraint; i.e. that the colonial education was not adequate to attract the majority of children to schooling. However he seems to have thought that by addressing this supply constraint – by making schooling more meaningful and attractive by integrating work and education – the issue of demand could also be solved. This could have been a mistake on his part.

We need to understand a few fundamental factors that may encourage children (and their parents) to use formal education. It is obvious that there are instrumental and intrinsic benefits of education, and among the instrumental ones, there could be those related to income and other aspects. However people may opt for formal schooling only if they foresee a significant positive break from their current situation. This break could be in terms of both income and non-income attributes. For example, in the beginning of Communist-ruled China, rural people who were encouraged to get educated did not witness a significant change in the nature of their livelihood. They continued to work in agriculture with pre-modern technology. Hence the break that was aimed at through education was not in terms of income. Instead the schooling or education provided was aiming at a (limited) break in their social and cultural situation. For example, there were conscious efforts to encourage the education of girls despite strong resistance from within the patriarchal society in China¹⁷. It was not only that the post-independent government did not strongly pursue such a cultural break for Indian society but that Gandhi might not have been comfortable with such efforts, even if these were made.

Gandhi was not a proponent of 'developmentalism' on either economic or social fronts. In fact, he insisted on continuity. According to him, 'all sound education is meant to fit one generation to take up the burden of the previous and to keep up the life of the community without breach or disaster'¹⁸. Fagg (2002: 65) notes that the 'kind of social change that Gandhi was calling for was primarily an inner moral transformation, one which placed as paramount the need for a conscious simplicity and self-imposed limitation'. 'Progress' which means an improvement of external (including economic) conditions did not have a major role in this scheme of thinking. Those who wanted to change the economic character of the society along a socialist path (like the USSR or China) or those who wanted to facilitate industrial development along a capitalist path (like South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand) had pursued mass-schooling as a strategy. A similar urge to spread mass education existed when ruling parties felt that the prevailing social and cultural order based on feudal or peasant lives, or those marked by ethnic differences, needed to be changed. Gandhi was least driven by these motivations. On the other hand, he visualised a society which found order and peace without adding substantially to the aggregate material production in the society. The improvement in the material condition for the poor that he envisioned was probably through a more humane sharing of resources for, and a technology accessible to, all. Although he prescribed a

¹⁷ For a discussion, see Chakrabarti, 1998.

¹⁸ *Young India*, 20-3-1924, as quoted in Kumarappa (1953).

role for formal education in the creation of such a society, people at large did not share that feeling. In essence, the limited possibility to see a significant change in the livelihood options, and not enough ideological support for a path of social or cultural change in post-independent India, could have reduced the demand for formal schooling.

This is not to say that 'learning' is not important for those people who continue to live in their current situation in an objective and subjective sense. Children may learn the occupation of parents, and also the social and cultural practices of family, kinship and community¹⁹. When the technology of occupations is relatively static, people may not have the incentive to sacrifice time to acquire formal knowledge, and they would be interested in learning by doing or being in the context. This then would have reduced the demand for formal schooling. One can argue that these people should have gone to schools for other purposes – say to be a 'better person'. But people may have had their own notions of what a 'better person' was; and contextual education may have seemed adequate to become such persons. The crucial point is that if people did not see a significant break from their own life through education, the demand for formal schooling would be low. This was especially so since the opportunity cost of time used in formal schooling was higher. In such a context, the education for life was likely to be derived from life itself – and not by enrolling and sitting in a formal school²⁰.

This had implications for the basic schooling approach (which aimed at integrating work in education) prescribed by Gandhi. First, the majority of children whose families continued in rural agricultural livelihoods continued to be away from school. The gross enrolment ratio at primary schools was only around 40% in 1950-51²¹. Those who came to school predominantly belonged to the higher caste groups and lived in the cities. Due to the 'rentier' nature of these classes, the opportunity cost of allowing children to pursue schooling was lower for them. These sections were not involved in agricultural or artisanal occupations and they were looking for jobs in the formal sector (mainly in public sector organizations, including the government). The liberal schooling pursued by the colonial rulers was appropriate for this purpose. In essence, the objective situation of the country in the 1950s and 1960s could be used to explain the failure of the basic schooling approach propagated by Gandhi. Or rather, its failure need not be attributed to the poor or half-hearted implementation, the opposition, or the lukewarm support from the liberals within the Congress Party, whose position is analysed in the following section.

19 That period did not witness any major technological change in agriculture (say like that during the period of Green Revolution) or related occupations.

20 There is an argument that Gandhi himself was aware of the limitations and not very enthusiastic about using formal schools as the main setting for realising his idea of basic education. Instead, he saw the community setting as the more appropriate place. (This is based on an observation by Sujit Sinha, a practitioner of Gandhi's approach to education).

21 Sachdeva, S. (n. d.) Education scenario and needs in India: Building a perspective for 2025.

Liberal opposition to Gandhi: Genuine concern but not enough action

The prominent critiques of Gandhi's approach towards education included those of liberals in organizations such as the Theosophical Society, National Liberal Foundation and Servants of India and individuals like K. T. Shah and B. R. Ambedkar²². Although Nehru was not openly against Gandhi's ideas, there is a perception that he was not overtly keen to pursue Gandhi's approach to school education. This is not surprising given the influence of socialism and rationalism on his thought. The discomfort of Nehru and others with Gandhi's approach seemed to have reflected in the agenda and discussions of the National Planning Committee²³. This is also evident from what is noted²⁴ as the continued support extended by the post-independence state to the education designed by colonial rulers. One attempt to explain this phenomenon is to use the class/caste character of the Indian state and elitist resistance to the Gandhian conception. However it may be fair to say that an understanding of the requirements of socialism also could have made many sceptical of the Gandhian approach towards education.

What is more important for this article is to understand the limitations of the ideology and actions of these liberal sections of the independence movement, the implications for the development path of education in general, and the processes related to work-oriented or skill-based education in India. Though there are accusations that the neglect of mass-education by the post-independent governments was intentional (or driven by the political economy of powerful interest groups), one can be charitable and argue that they had followed a 'liberal' schooling policy of providing education to those who wanted it. Such a policy in the absence of strong demand-generating measures may not encourage many children to use schools and that is what happened in most parts of India. The students' enrolment in primary schools would not have been higher then irrespective of whether Nehru and others had supported whole heartedly the basic schooling approach or not. The liberal rulers of post-independent India did not foresee the need for a mandatory (illiberal!) policy of schooling to achieve their liberal ends. Even if they wanted an education different from that prescribed by Gandhi, they did not seem to have made enough efforts in that direction. This resulted in a situation where only the minority continued with the formal schooling, and they preferred the same kind of education that was made available by the colonial rulers.

To some extent, the limited growth in the demand for schooling in the first three to four decades of post-independent India was an outcome of the economic policies pursued. The Government of India (GOI) then pursued an economic growth strategy which was aimed at sustaining the democratic nature of the country. In the debates on whether to tax agriculture (the main economic activity) to mobilise more savings and pursue a higher growth trajectory for the economy, the political

22 For a discussion, see, "Assessment" in Fagg (2002). Some of these criticisms were on practical grounds like that of N. R. Malkani (regarding not having enough teachers to teach artisanal skills) or of K. T. Shah (against the principle of self-help propagated by Gandhi for the running of schools).

23 For a discussion, see Fagg (2002: 69).

24 Report of the National Focus Group on Work and Education (2005: 5).

preference was to avoid such a strategy to keep the rural elite happy (so that they would not take steps to unsettle the budding democracy of the country)²⁵. On the other hand, policies of industrial development were influenced by socialist planning and the framework of import-substitution.

The relatively closed nature of the economy with controls over exports and imports (and also the licensing for the expansion of industrial production) had created a situation in which domestic industrial production could not expand on the basis of exports. This and the lower growth of domestic demand within the country had limited the size of industrial production. Hence the jobs available in the industrial sector, especially the formal sector, were limited. The government-driven industrial production was in relatively technology-intensive sectors such as steel. Most of the jobs in such industrial activities (mainly in public sector organizations) required the completion of schooling with some level of technical or higher education. This was suitable for that section of the society which was completing schooling even before independence or those which followed them. On the other hand, the pace of development of lower-end manufacturing was slower. This has reduced the number of jobs available in such manufacturing – which is the opportunity sought by people with some level of schooling especially when they want to move out of subsistence agriculture. This has dampened the interest to acquire schooling especially among those people who would have looked for non-agricultural jobs without pursuing any level of higher education.

The agricultural sector also did not undergo any significant technological change until the late sixties. However, the Green Revolution began later. What was the impact of the Green Revolution on the demand for education? Theoretically, the Green Revolution could have led to a greater use of schools for two reasons: (a) There could be an incentive to acquire education if people perceived its need to internalise or assimilate new technology; (b) The possible income growth through the Green Revolution could enable sections of society to afford sending their children to school.

However, there could be different reasons for the slower growth of demand for education even during the Green Revolution. Farmers may not have perceived the need for formal schooling to internalise or build on the technologies and practices propagated by the revolution. The social disincentives that work against the education of girls may not disappear among farmers even when their income grows through the use of technology, if social norms do not change²⁶. The skewed nature of the land ownership in India was such that those land owners who benefited from the Green Revolution were mostly from the upper or middle caste groups, and some of them may have started using schooling even without the Green Revolution, but it may have failed to enthuse the majority of others who depended on agriculture (including farm workers). The benefits of the Green

25 A debate of this kind happened between the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and an economist of the Planning Commission, namely, Dr. K. N. Raj. For those interested in this debate, see Government of India, 1952. First Five Year Plan. New Delhi: Planning Commission.

26 The unwillingness to send girls to schools could be seen even among those farmers who experienced income growth through the availability of irrigation facilities (Santhakumar et al, 2016).

Revolution were available more (and firstly) in areas with facilities for irrigation. This may have enabled the catching up in terms of schooling in Punjab and Tamil Nadu whereas such an effect was slower in many drier parts of India where people continued to depend on rainfall for cultivation. In summary, the technological change in agriculture too contributed only little to the overall demand for education. The liberals who ruled post-independent India had an interest in modernisation and development but their policies failed to usher in the material circumstances necessary for such a development. A conventional Marxist reading of this situation could be that the liberals in India, despite their ideological persuasion, had failed to usher in a democratic revolution enabling the transformation from feudalism to capitalism.

With such a limited demand for education, the liberals' view of education had also failed to attract the majority of Indians. Such a liberal approach to education has led to the provision of schooling to the better off sections of society or those who demand it. Hence it is not very different from colonial education in terms of its consequences. One can compare the post-independent government's approach to schooling in India with that of socialist countries like the USSR and (pre-reform) China and capitalist countries in South-East Asia (like South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, etc.). Though the former had followed inward-looking economic policies, there was a political and governmental push for mass education. The latter set of countries went ahead with mass education as a strategy to facilitate export-oriented industrial development. On the other hand, India did not work towards mass schooling until the 1990s despite its socialist-oriented economic policies.

What would be the views of left-of-centre intellectuals or those influenced by different shades of socialism? Theoretically, they should be less comfortable with Gandhi's static economic model, and should have argued for mass education and the skill development of the majority of the working population facilitating industrialisation (to be regulated and controlled by the state). We will take up the views of this stream of intelligentsia in the following section.

The position of the radicals: A wrong reading of reality

By the term 'radical' here, I mean the position of left-of-centre intellectuals who have taken a deep interest in this issue of work-in-education. Anil Sadgopal, who has chaired the NFG on Work and Education epitomises this position, and it has influenced the background paper for the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2005. Though we may use this document here, the purpose is to discuss the ambiguity of the position left-of-centre intellectuals in general take on this issue. There are others who have taken a left-of-centre position regarding issues on education in general. This includes Krishna Kumar. According to him, the failure to promote mass education in India was due to the disinterest on the part of the owners of property and capital in any action that undermined the supply of cheap child-labour (Kumar, 2005).

It is difficult to have a common characterisation of left-of-centre intellectuals since there was a diversity of positions among them. It seems like Anil Sadgopal represents a trait that finds common

ground with Gandhi on the one hand, and shares a vehement criticism of the market and private capital on the other. One would expect the Marxist scholars to agree with the liberals in the Congress party in their lukewarm endorsement of Gandhi's ideas of basic schooling.

These leftist or radical scholars have not assessed adequately the reasons for the lukewarm interest in the basic schooling approach of Gandhi. The limited support for Gandhi's approach was not merely due to the prevailing 'Brahminical' view on education but also due to the objective situation of the majority that did not encourage them to demand and use formal schooling. Though the radical scholars recognise the lower use of schooling by the majority (including the marginalised sections of the society), they attribute it to a schooling which does not recognise the work and life experiences of these sections of the society²⁷. In that sense, these scholars share a tendency among educationists in general who see the 'disinterest' in schooling among sections of children as an outcome of the curriculum, pedagogy and other school-related factors. On the other hand, socioeconomic research on education has demonstrated that educational achievements of children (not only enrolment and attendance but also learning) depend more on household and social factors²⁸. However, there is a tendency to prescribe changes in curriculum and pedagogy (or affairs related to school) without thinking about whether these would be adequate to bring in the majority of children to (or enthuse them to be, or learn well, in) schools.

These intellectuals are against a greater role for market and private capital in education (and the economy). Anil Sadgopal has attributed a number of current ills in Indian education to the opening up of the country's economy in the mid-eighties, and to the adoption of liberalisation and globalisation policies. One needs to highlight certain factual problems of this position here. India has witnessed a substantial expansion of schooling only after the liberalisation of its economy. This is evident from the rapid improvements in school infrastructure during the last two to three decades. Nearly 87% of habitations in the country could have a primary school within 1 km distance by 2004 (Govinda and Bandopadhyay, 2007). 78% had a secondary school within 3 km distance by then. All these have increased children's enrolment in school – by 2013, nearly 96% of children of the relevant age group have been enrolled in primary schools. Pupil-teacher ratios have fallen by nearly 20% (from 47.4 to 39.8) between 2003 and 2011; the fraction of schools with toilets and electricity has more than doubled (from 40 to 84% for toilets and 20 to 45 for electricity); the fraction of schools with functioning midday meal programs has nearly quadrupled (from 21 to 79%); and the overall index of school infrastructure has improved compared to 2003 (Muralidharan, 2013). This was

27 The National Focus Group's Report on Work and Education (2005: 2-3) notes: *The education system has tended to 'certify' this form of knowledge as being the only 'valid' form. In the process, the knowledge inherent among the vast productive forces in the country along with its related values and skills has been excluded from the school curriculum. The legacy of colonial education was built upon precisely such a concept of 'certified' or 'valid' knowledge that is alienated from productive work and its social ethos. Perhaps, this dichotomy lies at the root of the present exclusionary character of [the] Indian education system which deprives more than half of the children of elementary education (Class I-VIII) and prevents two-thirds of them from completing high school, the situation of SC and ST children (with the girl child in particular) being much more alarming.*

28 A recent assessment in the context of the USA can be seen in Murnane (2013). For a review of the evidence in general, see, Lee and Shute (2010). An assessment in the context of India is given in Santhakumar et al (2016).

possibly due to the increased spending on school education by the GOI through targeted schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), and also due to the matching increase in investments by the state governments. It is not surprising to see governments expanding the provision of schooling after the 1990s since the higher growth of the economy has led to higher revenues for the states, which can be used for social services including education. Though the expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has not gone up significantly, the absolute amount of resources has increased significantly since GDP started growing at a higher rate in the country from the mid-eighties (or during the post-reform period). However, despite this improvement in supply of education during the last two decades or the post-reform period in India, nearly 45-50% of children still do not complete schooling (Santhakumar et al, 2016). Hence the lack of completion of schooling cannot be solely due to the problems of provisioning, and one needs to consider demand.

Though these left-of-centre scholars have criticised 'capital' for the ills of schooling (including its inability to reach a significant share of the society), it is not clear why owners of capital are not interested to get a large pool of educated and skilled workers. It may be more correct to view the inadequate focus on mass education in post-independent India as part of the general failure of the Indian state and its elite rulers in modernising the society as a whole or completing the democratic revolution (which was necessary to facilitate a capitalist development) in the country. This could be due to the influence of pre-capitalist forces. These left-of-centre intellectuals have generally neglected the continued role of pre-capitalist forces in shaping the education in the country. They do not reckon the role of inward-looking policies of Indian governments in the first three to four decades (which was justified on the basis of a socialist rhetoric but such an ideological position did not encourage them to spread schooling to all as in socialist countries) in making the economic condition of India backward, which has dampened the demand for education.

These scholars are not enthusiastic in viewing work and education as a way to create a skilled workforce, as evident from the criticism of NFG (2005) of National Policy of Education (NPE) (1986). It could be driven by a pedagogical concern – since such a focus on vocational education in higher grades neglects the pedagogical role of work-in-education envisaged by Gandhi. It can also be due to ideological reasons since these scholars are not that comfortable in converting education into an enterprise for the creation of a workforce for capitalism. In doing so, they may be intentionally or unintentionally arguing against a conventional Marxist idea of viewing capitalism as a necessary phase for the emergence of socialism. Or by taking a position which works against the development of capitalism in the country, they may be inadvertently supporting the persisting influence of the pre-capitalist forces. This could be due to the developments in Marxism and social sciences in general during the second half of the twentieth century. The post-capitalist or post-modern concerns rooted in the experience of the advanced capitalist countries have led to a 'valorisation' or somewhat uncritical attitude towards the pre-capitalist tendencies in the developing world within Marxist circles and social sciences in general. It is somewhat ironical to note that nearly 50% of

children between ages 6-16 are not in schools in India (even in 2014), and here the role of pre-capitalist forces and norms is very clear. Girls constitute the majority of those who do not complete schooling and here the prevailing gender-norms play an important role. Moreover, those who do not complete schooling are more likely to come from production spaces which have witnessed a limited intrusion of capitalism.

Though the diagnosis of these scholars for the lack of adequate interest in work-in-education in the initial decades of independent India is incorrect, their prescription for an integration of work and schooling in the current context needs to be evaluated differently (and we discuss this issue in the final section). The context has changed and there is a greater focus currently on achieving 'schooling for all' in India. This includes the passing of the Right to Education (RTE) Act. However, the success of a work-in-education format depends on whether it can provide the kind of skills demanded by current and future situations of Indian economy as manifested in different locations. These need not be the skills or livelihood options that were available to people when Gandhi was formulating his idea of basic schooling. We take up the current discourses related to skill development in the following section. We can see a certain kind of incorrect reading of the socioeconomic situation framing these discourses too.

Market pragmatists: Not reading economics correctly

It is generally recognised today that India does not have enough skilled workers. Or the impression is that the lack of skills is the main reason for the high level of unemployment. The limitations of the prevailing forms of vocational education are also well acknowledged. All these have led to a greater focus on skill development in recent years. The National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (initially developed in 2009 and revised in 2015) of the GOI is part of these efforts. It sees the central challenge as a 'paucity of (a) highly trained workforce, as well as the non-employability of large sections of the conventionally educated youth, who possess little or no job skills' (ibid: 2). It is not that the policy focuses exclusively on skill-development. It sees the need for appropriate economic policies (along with skill development) to create employment. Along with the focus on skills, development of entrepreneurship is seen as a way to create more jobs. These efforts to enhance skills of the workforce and develop entrepreneurship are laudable. However, these policies also suffer from the lack of a realistic understanding of the socioeconomic situation.

The policy identifies the challenge of skilling India's population as follows: *it is estimated that only 4.69% of the total workforce in India has undergone formal skill training as compared to 68% in UK, 75% in Germany, 52% in USA, 80% in Japan and 96% in South Korea. While the debate on the exact quantum of the challenge continues, there is no disputing the fact that it is indeed a challenge of formidable proportion* (Ibid: 6). Hence they have considered, in one sense, the supply and demand for skills.

However, it has to be noted that a significant section of the unskilled workforce in India is illiterate or has only limited schooling experience. Out of the 431 million workforce between 15-59 years old, 125 million (29%) were illiterate; and 102 million (23.7%) had an education level up to and below primary schooling. Only 17.6% of this workforce had middle school experience, 12.2% had secondary schooling and 6.8% had a higher secondary qualification (Mehrotra et al, 2013). It shows that more than 50% of the work force do not have even primary schooling experience. Most of the skills required in the industrial sector may need a secondary schooling experience, and that is available to only 12% of the population. (For those with higher education working in the service sector, industrial skills may not be that relevant.) In essence, skilling India's population needs a pre-requisite of 'schooling for all'.

This is evident from the experience of South-East Asian countries. The difference between these countries and India in terms of schooling is striking. The mean years of schooling (MYS) is about 7.3 in Thailand; and 7.6 in Indonesia (whereas only 5.4 in India in 2011). These countries have a higher share of manufacturing and industry in their GDP. It may be noted that the kind of schooling (in terms of content and quality) available in these countries is not characteristically different from that in India. On the other hand, the stagnation or slow development of manufacturing in India could be due to its failure in terms of spreading schooling to the majority.

Since half of the students does not complete schooling in India currently and that percentage was much higher a decade ago, the majority does not acquire those minimal set of skills which are required for a formal sector job (either in manufacturing or the service sector) here. This has implications since India is competing with those countries in East and South-East Asia, wherein the share of students who complete schooling successfully is much higher than that in India. They take up jobs in lower-end manufacturing after completing schooling. Hence these countries have a competitive advantage in manufacturing over India. Therefore the former could take a larger share of the market for manufactured goods not only internationally but also within India. This has caused the slower growth of lower-end manufacturing in India. It would also reduce the number of jobs available for just-schooled people in India, which in turn may reduce the incentive to complete schooling for sections of its population.

Epilogue

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches at the international level towards imparting skills as part of school education. First, is that prevalent in continental Europe (mainly Germany) where students in secondary grades are divided/selected into those who can opt for vocational education, and others who are encouraged to opt for different levels of university education. In Germany²⁹, where the vocational education model has been very successful (CEDEFOP, 2008) the segregation

29 For a discussion of the usefulness of the German model in other countries, see Euler (2013).

of students between higher and vocational education is carried out by the teachers based on an understanding of the merit and/or aptitude of the student. On the other hand, parents determine the choice of the stream of their wards in a few other countries such as Greece. The latter system may lead to the reproduction of social inequalities in the education system, with the majority of those who opt for vocational education coming from poorer sections and/or working class. The second approach is to have a common schooling (with a liberal arts and science orientation) for all students for 12 years, an approach pioneered by the UK.

There are a number of issues arising out of the choice between the vocational and higher education streams. Whether it will lead to a reproduction and persistence of social fragmentation (or class system) – as mentioned in the previous paragraph — is one such issue. Gauging the appropriate age for segregation is another question. Other concerns include the difficulty for those who have opted for vocational education to get back to academic higher education, even if it is theoretically possible; the possible signaling of the vocational education certificate as a 'low capability' type; and the somewhat dead-end nature of this track of education (Shavit and Muller, 2000). Transferability of the skill acquired across industries or the ability of a person to use the acquired skill in different employment situations could be another concern. This is especially so in an era marked by a faster pace of technological change. It is also not clear whether the life-long return from the vocational stream of education is higher than that from general education³⁰. Though these issues are not relevant for the common-schooling approach as adopted by the UK, there is a perception that a significant share of students there waste a number of years without making a choice, and equipping themselves, for an appropriate career. This could be costly for their own personal lives but also for the economy and society.

In one sense, colonial education in India intended a liberal schooling (for all those who wanted it), and it did not aim at imparting skills as part of schooling. It was used by less than 10% of the society. Liberal education was attractive for these children since they were not working (in agriculture or artisanal occupations) for their livelihood as they belonged to a 'rentier' class. The lower opportunity cost of time enabled them to opt for such schooling. The probability of getting a job in the colonial administration became an added attraction. It is in this context that Gandhi wanted to use work (mainly those requiring agricultural and artisanal skills) as a pedagogical tool for education. However, the majority of children who were acquiring such skills (through learning by doing) did not view formal schooling which aimed at imparting similar 'skills' as attractive, since the opportunity cost of such schooling was higher for them.

Despite the intention of liberals (among the leaders of the freedom movement in India) to provide a modern education, their unwillingness to expand mass education (through investments and a mandatory schooling policy) had led to a situation where even by the 1990s, not more than one-third

30 There are a number of problems in measuring such gains systematically (Eichhorst et al, 2012).

of children (of the relevant age group) had completed schooling in the country. This was due to the lower demand for education and the absence of policies which could have increased such demand. Substantial investments for expanding schooling in India has occurred only after the liberalisation of its economy and that too during the last two decades. Despite these, nearly half of the population of the relevant age group does not complete schooling currently, and here poverty is not the only constraint. Social factors including gender norms continue to play an important role. This aspect was somewhat neglected by the radical scholars who were concerned about the exclusion of the marginalised from schooling and education in India.

It is in this context that we need to understand the current efforts to achieve 'schooling for all' and also the development of skills for the working population in India. If we look around at countries in South-East Asia such as Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and so on, these could develop manufacturing industries significantly better than India (with a schooling not significantly different from that in India in terms of content or quality). For example, Thailand is doing exceedingly well in the production and export of computer hardware. A major share of workers in the manufacturing firms of not only Thailand but also the Philippines is women. However, the crucial difference in these countries is the near completion of secondary schooling by the majority of boys and girls. Hence a major part of the skill deficit in our country needs to be seen in its 'general schooling failure', especially at the secondary level. This is not to underestimate the importance of skills.

However the current focus on 'schooling for all' gives an opportunity to integrate work and education in India. The issue of sacrificing a more beneficial route of higher education by opting for vocational or skill-based education is not serious in the context of India. On the other hand, the crucial issue here is the non-completion of schooling. For many children, the real choice is between opting for a skill-based education (and becoming a skilled worker) and non-schooling (and becoming an unskilled worker). The schooling should offer these children a choice to be a skilled worker, rather than taking up the default choice of an unskilled worker – which includes that of a home maker.

Hence the current efforts to include skill education as part of schooling should continue with greater vigour. An integration of work and education may increase the attractiveness of formal schooling in areas where significant sections drop out of secondary schools. There could be an explicit connection between (secondary) schooling and vocations, especially for those sections of society which may see dropping out of schools (and participating in unskilled work) more attractive³¹. This linkage is more important currently and for the future than it was in the past in India when the enrolment in secondary schooling was only by those sections of society who valued the completion of general schooling (and probably some levels of higher education.) A linkage between work and

31 There is evidence to link the participation in the vocational stream and reduction in dropout rate and educational achievement in developing countries (Psacharopoulos and Loxley, 1985). The lower economic returns of vocational education in comparison with general education should not be a concern here since these children may not get any education in the absence of a vocational stream.

education may facilitate inter-generational mobility if children of a section of agricultural and unskilled workers could become skilled workers. Hence the role for 'work and education' linkage is more relevant for countries like India³², especially in the current scenario.

32 Here too we need not be concerned about the returns of vocational education versus general education, since these students are less likely to acquire any academic skills in the absence of such a linkage.

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